

## SECURITY FOR FARMERS

### The Farm Security Administration's Program for the South

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In the belief that little of permanent value can result from half-way programs, the Farm Security Administration has concerned itself with building a program designed to meet, as nearly as land resources will permit, the needs of the million farm families who were on relief in 1933, and of 2,000,000 others whose insecurity, even today, places their independence in peril.

We are constantly being told that there is nothing new about the problems of sharecroppers and other low-income farm groups beyond the current emphasis on them, coupled with the newly-acquired articulateness of a folk traditionally unexpressive.

Yet this is by no means all the truth, for the poor farmer of three generations past had still some place to go in his extremity--there was still unexploited land for those with the hardihood to seek it, and the great industrial centers of today, then scarcely more than in the making, welcomed new blood from the hinterlands.

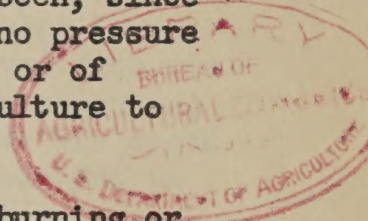
The problem of conserving the soil for the future while making a thrifty living for the present was there, as it had always been, since the first sod was broken for the first farm, but there was no pressure of ill-fed farm millions, of cattle starving in dust bowls, or of stricken families driven to the road by a mechanizing agriculture to force attention to it.

As national isolation ended with the advent of fast oil-burning or electrically driven ships, of submarines with phenomenal cruising ranges, and clipper planes following trans-oceanic air lanes, so agricultural isolation ceased when developing urban industries invaded the farm home, displacing the products of the loom and the fireside bench with those of power machines.

Each new invasion--of clothing, of furnishings, of machinery--deprived the farm of some measure of its original independence--forced upon it more reliance upon cash with which to buy city-made products. Providing cash meant producing cash crops, many of them sold in international markets, cash crops that must be made even if it meant buying food that might better have been raised at home, or forcing crops from worn-out land unfit for cultivation.

America's lands were vast, and disaster was not immediate, so for long years its approach escaped serious attention, save for an occasional voice crying in the wilderness-Seaman Knapp, who founded the United States

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Extension Service a quarter of a century ago, Theodore Roosevelt with his pleas for conservation of national resources, and the country life associations bent on preventing human waste. Even before these, in the early days of the Republic, the landed gentry made sporadic efforts to direct the thought of their day to the problem. That they failed was probably no fault of theirs. It is hard to convince a man in the midst of plenty that his grandchildren may starve.

#### NEGROES WERE PIONEERS, ALSO

More than is generally realized, Negroes as individuals have shared in everything that has happened to America's land, going out in covered wagons with other westward-bound pioneers, sharing the hardships and reaping the rewards that went to all exploiters of new territory. But Negroes as a group were both backbone and incentive for the profligate agriculture of the South--of a cash-crop economy that built fortunes for a few, but squeezed dry both poor whites and Negroes, casting them aside when the wasted acres could no longer provide them--or the few--with a living.

How Negro slavery with its alluring prospect of apparently limitless labor for cash-crop production laid the foundations for the system of colossal waste that was the cotton economy is an old story. Less commonplace is that of the wreckage left behind by the collapse both of slavery and of the false economy it supported.

Cash-cropping on a grand scale called for labor and yet more labor, so over-large families were encouraged--almost demanded--first from the slaves, next, with the development of sharecropping, from freedmen and poor whites. Down to today the prospective cropper estimates his worth to the land-owner in terms of so many "head of chillun" he can put in the field.

#### PROBLEM IN SOUTHEAST

Result: in the Southeast, for instance, we find the greatest density of rural population in the country--70 percent of the total population is in rural areas against 47 percent for the nation as a whole; and we find this population encouraged by a wasteful system, crowded on fewer and fewer cultivable acres, as the results of the same wasteful system take thousands of acres annually out of cultivation.

The Negro population in this area shows a net increase of 75,000 a year--the rate of natural increase being only two-thirds that of whites in rural districts because of the high death rate. This population, then, is thrown in direct competition for a livelihood with a white population with a net increase of 180,000 a year.

This is the area which contains over 60 percent of the country's eroded land--97,000,000 acres badly damaged and 30,000,000 more completely ruined; the area from which rivers are washing 20 million tons of potash, nitrogen and phosphorous to the sea, each year.





In Alabama and Georgia, where 56,500 farm families are fighting for existence on land too poor to produce a living, and 47,500 are located on farms too small to produce a living--there are potential land resources for only 25,000 new, family-size farms and little of this land is actually available.

With this picture in mind, the serious comment made recently by an educated, intelligent adult, that we ought to throw open "all those millions of idle acres of ours" to European refugees, is significant as an indication of what the average American, white or black, does not know about his country's land, about the problems that face the farmers who produce his food--about the problems that face local and national governments, particularly in the South, in their attempts to find a way out for these millions of farm people.

What is the status of these people who form the backwash of an outmoded system, and what are the hard facts of daily existence which face them?

#### 719,748 FARM OPERATORS

In terms of Negroes, 719,748 are operating farmers in the Southeast. Anyone who actually works a farm is an operating farmer. Slightly over one-fifth of these farm operators--154,866--are small owners; nearly half a million--464,588--are tenants; and of these tenants, 352,830--half of all Negro farm operators in these eleven states--are sharecroppers.

As the raising of cash crops--cotton and tobacco--increased, production of food decreased and certainty of cash income with it, for these crops are heavily dependent on a sharply fluctuating international market, affected by wars and rumors of wars, reflecting the insecurity of other peoples. So tenant families spend half of their cash income for food with the furnish-merchant at the crossroads store or the county seat.

Compared with the rest of the country the Southeast runs short, each year, of 121 million gallons of milk and 70 million dozen eggs. Deaths from pellagra, a diet deficiency disease, are nine times the average for the country. From 50 to 90 percent of the children in large areas of the Southeast have insufficient diets. These people need food--fresh food. Farm Security believes that they can produce it if given a chance.

These same Southeast folk are paying three-fifths of the country's fertilizer bills out of only one-fifth of its agricultural earnings. Because of depleted soil, working farmers in this area are forced to spend proportionately more money for fertilizer than do farmers anywhere else in the country--hence they have less than any others with which to employ casual farm labor.







## MECHANIZATION

The problems of the Southeast, modified and with sectional variations, are the problems of other southern farmers. As farming stretches westward the size of the farms increases and the emphasis in the farmers' troubles shifts from poor land, or too little of it, to mechanization. Still largely a threat in the East, due to smaller farm incomes and less favorable topography, in the Southwest mechanization appears as a problem of rapidly increasing proportions--a riddle for which there is as yet no immediate solution. Tenancy, in the few places where it is decreasing, is taking the final plunge downward, disintegrating into day labor and migrancy. Nor can the answer be found in urban industries still unable to re-absorb their own unemployed labor, plus the untouched supply provided by urban youth trained for non-existent jobs.

For the present, at least, the way out of the farmer's problems must center around the farm, and to be of any lasting value it must at least provide adequate food and shelter, whole clothes, and the chance for unembarrassed association with other farm folk. It must also include some hope for the future by conserving arable land and consistently working to reclaim as much as possible of the damaged acreage. And this, in brief, is precisely the program of the Farm Security Administration.

Once the pleasing myth that "no one can starve on a farm" was dispelled by the knowledge that the word "acres" was not necessarily synonymous with "food," there immediately arose the necessity for thinking in terms of the facts. Fact one was that the ratio of farmers to productive crop-land acreage was badly out of balance.

Relief farmers, and those on the ragged edge between want and relief had passed the point where they could obtain credit. Credit advanced from public or private sources to farmers on non-productive or sub-marginal lands would be money thrown to the four winds. Yet, assuming--as Farm Security did assume--that these farm folk valued their independence as much as anyone else and were willing to work to preserve it if given a chance, initial credit was a "must" if the situation was to be met squarely.

The common denominator for these facts was to make loans to farmers on producing land, and where they were not on producing land, to help them to find it before making the loan--thus did the much-abused term "resettlement" come into being.

## LOANS PLUS EDUCATION

Good soil once found, there was an obligation to keep it productive, both as insurance for the loan and as insurance for the family's future and the country's future. Farmers, black or white, who had been thinking for generations along the furrow of cash-cropping could not be expected to change this thinking overnight and without aid. This involved the establishment of a teaching program, and, in turn, of determining what direction that teaching should take.







For years the United States Extension Service had been trying to meet a progressively bad market situation by instituting live-at-home programs. For half a century Tuskegee Institute had been exhorting the South to feed itself. And this self-maintenance was the direction determined upon for FSA instruction. Farm Security's program emerged, then, as one of a self-contained farm management backed up by credit and accompanied by expert guidance--the whole leading to greater self-sufficiency of individual farms and of neighborhoods.

The floor of the greater FSA program is the rehabilitation program, which has, since its inception, reached approximately half a million of the South's needy farm families. Most of the 50,000 Negro farm families who were, and are, a part of this number are in the South, although such loans have been made to Negroes in every state in the Union except eight in the extreme North.

These families, through farm and home management supervisors, are learning that an adequate, well-planned garden and a cow and poultry in the barnyard mean better health and cash in their pockets--the cash formerly spent in buying food produced and processed by someone else. They are learning how to correlate crop production with market demand, and that safety lies in diversification. Terracing and contour plowing have taken on a dollar-and-cents meaning, and children are beginning to know that there is a definite connection between stopping gullies and having clothes to wear to school.

Rehabilitation loans are not large, usually only a few hundred dollars --just enough to repair a roof, provide work stock or simple farm implements where these are lacking, and allow something for food until a first crop is made. Always this amount is budgeted with the assistance of FSA supervisors according to carefully made farm and home plans. Successive loans are frequently made and paid out, year by year, until a family is completely rehabilitated and is able to go ahead independently once more. In the southern states alone there are over 50,000 such "graduate" families, who have fully repaid all loans and reached a satisfactory standard of living, and without further aid or supervision are carrying on the practices they learned "on the program." For the country as a whole this number increases to nearly 115,000.

Tenant-purchase loans, which may be considered the second part of the Farm Security Administration's loan program, make larger advances at still lower rates available to a limited number of tenants who show ownership ability, and are willing to cooperate in carrying out the same self-maintaining, land-conserving program that is followed by rehabilitation borrowers. The larger, long-term tenant-purchase loans are made for the purchase of farms, with the same requirement of land productivity, and with the intent of stimulating ownership. The payments approximate the amounts usually paid for rent. Approximately a thousand Negro tenants and croppers have made the step to ownership with this assistance.







## HOMESTEAD PROJECTS

Possibly the most talked-of part of this program--the Farm Security homestead projects--are serving the dual purpose of providing patterns for progressive agriculture and giving several thousand farm families of like status and interests a chance to work together, much in the manner of the old pioneer communities, sharing social life, and assisting each other wherever possible. They are getting, also, a knowledge of the value of group purchasing and marketing, of producing as a group certain commodity specialties--a certain variety of cotton, a special kind of peanuts or potatoes, or one breed of hogs. And they are learning to secure and make use of community-owned services and equipment. These same services and equipment, together with medical care, have been made available to the much larger number of rehabilitation and tenant-purchase farmers through community-service loans and medical care associations.

Somewhat similar communities known as rental cooperatives have been established in high-tenancy areas, with renting on an acceptable standard, rather than ownership, as a basis. Here the idea has been to prove the workability, from the standpoint of profit and loss to both landlord and tenant, of good housing, health protection, and self-maintenance. Some two thousand Negro farmers are sharing this experience.

So the program takes shape as a whole plan for a given part of the country's population, influencing farm management patterns, tenure arrangements, land use practices, credit rates, diet, sanitation and health, community facilities, techniques of cultivation, crop and acreage distribution and stability of residence.

For a long time to come there will be the need for adjustment of farm population to land resources, and an absence of industrial outlets in making such adjustments. Whatever will help the man already on the farm to make a decent living there on a comparatively small acreage, without too much dependence on cash crops, is the pattern that the low-income farmer will need to follow. And this will be doubly true of the Negro farmer, with less opportunity than most to acquire productive land, with less access to credit, and less exposed to education, progressive thinking and normal community life. So far he has shown himself ready and able to keep step with his fellows in the direction of a long-overdue agricultural readjustment.

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